

Tennessee Council on Vocational-Technical Education

Student Dropout Focus Group Study

Presented by
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Executive Summary

This executive summary presents the highlights of the Tennessee Council on Vocational Education (TCOVE) Student Drop Out Focus Group Project that the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) at The University of Memphis conducted for TCOVE. The focus group project represents Phase II of a three-phase project that was designed to examine issues related to the dropout problem in Tennessee. The objectives of the focus group study were to assess reasons students drop out of school, characteristics of the student at risk for dropping out and recommendations for measures to reduce the incidence of dropouts.

- Five Tennessee school district/counties, three rural and two urban, were chosen to participate in the sessions. The rural districts/counties were Claiborne, Hancock, and Hawkins; the urban districts/counties were Davidson and Madison. The Tennessee Technology Centers chosen were; Morristown which represented a rural center, and Nashville and Jackson which represented urban centers. A total of 95 individuals participated in the eight focus group meetings. Of those, 42 individuals were teachers, 20 were counselors, and 33 were students at Tennessee Technology Centers.
- The participants described what they perceived to be the most prevalent characteristics of the at risk student. The characteristics were:
- Cannot read or exhibits low reading and reading comprehension proficiencies
- Lives in a non-traditional, non-supportive, and/or dysfunctional family environment
- Exhibits low self-esteem
- Is disruptive in class
- Exhibits poor attendance patterns
- Is a low achiever
- Is involved in drugs and/or alcohol
- Is in the vocational education program

- ➡ The most frequently mentioned characteristic of the at-risk student in the teacher/counselor groups was his/her inability to read or to read with some proficiency and comprehension. The most frequently mentioned characteristic of the at risk student in the technology student groups was the home environment, i.e., non-traditional, non-supportive, and/or dysfunctional family environments.
- ➡ The participants said that the reasons students drop out is that students get behind and cannot catch up, one size fits all approach to education, problems at home, teen pregnancy, peer pressure and the transition from middle to high school.
- ➡ The teachers and counselors said that they faced numerous barriers in dealing with problems of the at risk student. First and foremost, they often had to deal with uncooperative parents or guardians, program cuts, lack of resources - staff in particular, and large class sizes. They were especially concerned about the cuts that were being made particularly in vocational education programs. Participants felt that opportunities and course offerings needed to be increased rather than cut.
- ➡ The participants were asked to create an ideal program with a goal of helping the at risk students become successful in school and reduce the likelihood of dropping out. One participant's comments seemed to summarize the opinion, "find him soon and then remediate." No one argued when participants across all groups said that the time to start was kindergarten. Further, no one argued when technology students proposed more aggressive measures where school personnel knocked on doors and attempted to sell parents and guardians on the value of an education. The majority also agreed that the ideal program had to contain a very strong and aggressive reading component.

The participants offered these recommendations to help the at risk student:

- ➡ Determine a child's learning style. We could do an IAP and put them where their strengths are. But we put them all together and we're so into this testing. Their strengths are in so many different areas and we

crush their self-esteem. Maybe have the Gateway standards where they have to pass the Gateway if they are on the college path, but if not go back and set a different standard. You could graduate with two different kinds of diplomas. Instead of calling it a degree, declare a focus.

- ➔ Lower student teacher ratios. We are mentors. We know some of these kids better than their parents do because we're with them a lot. We need more time and resources. I don't think the teachers need to do it all. I think there needs to be a program where they hire people to come in and do it. It is very hard to give the twenty students the attention that they need. It would make my job so much easier if I had a junior instructor. You have thirty-five students and you're supposed to do one on one? It's impossible.
- ➔ Provide transportation for after school activities. A lot of students would love to participate in the after school programs but transportation is a big problem here. A lot of them sit on the bus for an hour. Some of our major attendance problems are with kids who live the furthest away from the school. Also, since the students are in clustered scheduling, provide everything within that cluster to eliminate driving.
- ➔ Develop an advisory board for policy makers comprised of teachers, counselors and students. I would like policy makers to ask us our opinions instead of setting a policy without talking to people who are closest to the issues and deal with them on a day to day basis.
- ➔ Develop parent education programs. You have a lot of parents where education is not important. Make home visits with the parents like social workers do. Have a set of tutors come in then and work with them, they could be college students who would counsel the parents about how important their child's education is.
- ➔ Provide consistency and support for student programs. The last 5 or 6 years there was a big push with pre-school, but this past year, pre-school money was cut. In the past there was money put into parenting and then all that money was cut. Every time the governor changes, president changes, we get a new agenda. There has to be consistency.

- ➔ Strengthen the vocational education programs. We need vocational education back, they have totally wiped it out. Expand computer course offerings including web design. Have these classes available, quit taking away. We're not leaving them anything. The schools need co-op programs that place students in organizations in the community where they can gain first hand knowledge of the working world. In addition add auto mechanics, keyboarding, cooking and diversified health programs not only to provide career choices for the students, but to provide the workforce that is consistent with the needs of the community. We are developing low-skill workers for low-skill jobs. Vocational education is a dumping ground with no real track to get the students anything that is quality. What are they going to do with a diploma that says I know family consumer science? What does that mean and where do they go with it. We're building all of these buildings in the community, but we're not training our students to build them. Until education gives total support to children who are not doing well, you're going to have dropouts.

“Every child can’t do the same thing, but every child can do something.”

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Introduction

This report presents the results of a focus group research project that the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) at The University of Memphis conducted for the Tennessee Council on Vocational Education (TCOVE). The focus group project represents Phase II of a three-phase project that was designed to examine issues related to the dropout problem in Tennessee. The objectives of the focus group study were to assess:

- ➡ Reasons students drop out of school
- ➡ Characteristics of the student at risk for dropping out
- ➡ Recommendations for measures to reduce the incidence of dropouts

Methodology

Five Tennessee school district/counties, three rural and two urban, were chosen to participate in the sessions. The rural districts/counties selected were Claiborne, Hancock, and Hawkins; the urban districts/counties were Davidson and Madison. The Tennessee Technology Centers (TTC) chosen also reflected a rural and urban mix; Morristown represented a rural center, while Nashville and Jackson represented urban centers.

TCOVE selected a representative from each of the eight locations to assist the SBBER with the project. Each representative was responsible for scheduling his location’s meeting, as well as reserving an appropriate meeting site. In addition, the representatives were responsible for selecting the group participants and ensuring their attendance at the meetings. The Bureau provided the representatives with materials to assist in these tasks (a sample of the materials is provided in the appendix).

Participants in the school district meetings included counselors and teachers who had firsthand experience with and knowledge of issues related to student dropouts from their schools. Participants in the Technology Center student meetings included individuals who had either dropped out of school or had considered dropping out but did not.

Two focus group guides were developed, one with specific discussion issues for the teachers and counselors and one with specific discussion issues for the Technology Center student groups. A sample of the two discussion guides is provided in the appendix. Each session was audio taped. The Bureau was responsible for the audio tape transcription, data analysis, and report development.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 95 individuals participated in the eight focus group meetings. Of those, 42 individuals were teachers, 20 were counselors, and 33 were students at Tennessee Technology Centers. The following presents information on each meeting location and the participant types:

- Cherokee High School/Rogersville: eight teachers and two counselors
- Claiborne County Schools: ten teachers and three counselors
- Davidson County Schools: six teachers and seven counselors
- Hancock County Schools: twelve teachers and four counselors
- Madison County Schools: six teachers/educators and four counselors
- Tennessee Technology Center/Jackson: ten students
- Tennessee Technology Center/Nashville: thirteen students
- Tennessee Technology Center/Morristown: ten students

Characteristics of the Teachers and Counselors

Each group contained a mix of academic and vocational education teachers plus counselors from the middle and high schools. All participants seemed to be well aware of the plight of the at-risk student and seemed eager to offer their opinions and recommendations to improve the retention rate of these students. Many of the participants had been involved in their school systems in various capacities throughout their careers and so spoke from a wealth of experience as educators.

Characteristics of the Technology Students

The average age of the Technology Center student participant was 31. In addition, 22 students had dropped out of school, while 11 students had considered dropping out but did not. Of the 22 participants who had dropped out, three quit when they were 16, one dropped out at age 18, and 1 quit at age 20. The remainder dropped out at age 17.

The Technology Center students conveyed a certain level of maturity and wisdom that seemed to have developed with age and with time for reflection on the decisions they made about school. The vast majority of the students who dropped out said they regretted it, and many said they wished they could relive that part of their lives. Many of the students were not only parents themselves with school-aged children, but also grandparents. These individuals seemed to have hands-on involvement in raising their grandchildren and expressed interest in their educational experiences. Most were committed to ensuring that their children and grandchildren stayed within traditional school programs.

Focus Group Report

This report presents an analysis of the data gathered in the eight focus groups. When reading the report, please keep in mind that focus group research is a qualitative research method. The data cannot be projected to the larger population, as is the case with quantitative research. Rather, focus group

research results provide ideas and recommendations for further investigation and discussions of interest to the project sponsor. The results of this focus group research study provide rich and ample information for those purposes. Throughout the report, the term “at risk” will be used to denote “at risk for dropping out of school.”

The report reflects the opinions, perceptions, and recommendations of teachers, counselors, and students attending classes in Tennessee Technology Centers. Differences in perceptions, if any, between the teacher/counselor groups and the student groups will be noted. In addition, differences in perceptions, if any, between the rural and urban school districts will be noted.

Overall Perceptions of the Dropout Problem

The participants were asked to discuss their impressions of the dropout problem. More specifically, they were asked first to consider whether dropping out of high school was a problem and second, if they believed that the number of dropouts had increased, stayed the same, or decreased over the past few years. The majority of the participants felt that dropping out of school was a problem. Most of the participants perceived that the dropout rate was increasing, while others said they could not be sure. Very few of the participants felt that the dropout rate was declining. A sample from those conversations follows:

Yes, it is a problem here. I can say that because I was a part of the GED program in the afternoons, and I was in charge of four different schools. I had so many people who were dropouts that we didn't have enough teachers to accommodate all of them. Most of those students had dropped out in the ninth or tenth grade, and it seems like ninth grade is where all of this begins.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I think the dropout problem is increasing, partly due to the tests they have to take. Some of them realize they can't pass them and so they give up. The tests I'm talking about are the Gateway tests and other comprehensive tests.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Dropout rate? Yes, it's a problem because if you have a high dropout rate, you're not going to attract industry and jobs.

—TTC Student

One urban group used this point in the discussion to debate the current guidelines for counting dropouts, which they found to be lacking in clarity and consistency. A few individuals in other groups expressed similar opinions as well. Most troublesome to them was their perception that the current system for counting dropouts possibly was not fair to school districts that were held accountable for high dropout rates and that the current system possibly did not provide an accurate count of actual dropouts. By way of example, several participants noted that under the current system, a student who dropped out of school but received a GED was considered a dropout. Also, in the past, there had been little apparent effort to develop a consistent and systematic way of tracking students who had dropped out of school. As a result, school districts could not be certain whether the students had actually dropped out or had transferred to another school. The situation was especially problematic because students who may have actually transferred were, in fact, counted as a dropout and, therefore, contributed to the school district's dropout rate. The participants recommended that a consistently applied policy for counting dropouts be developed and applied statewide. Comments from that particular discussion follow:

One of our biggest concerns was how you determine whether a student is a dropout. We've had a lot of discussion about that. We heard that students who dropped out actually transferred to other

schools, but we never heard that they had done that. So, we felt it was a mistake, that our dropout rate might be higher than it actually is. We did find some errors, but it took us a while to really understand what a dropout is.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

The state is using our attendance to calculate the number of dropouts. There is no input from us where these students are going.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We found out the other day that when a student enters the GED program, and we do have a very successful one here, that student is considered a dropout.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

There was a student in my office the other day with his mother, and we all agreed that the Job Corps program was the best place for him to go. It's hard for me to counsel someone and say, I know that's the best thing for you, but don't do that because it's going to count against the school system. It still counts as a dropout.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Anytime we have a child enrolled in an educational program, whether it's a traditional program or one that counselors feel is more beneficial to the child, it should not be considered a dropout. That is the only way we know the extent of the problem.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Yes, deciding how to count dropouts is very important. But, we need to be spending more time identifying and assisting students who are potential dropouts.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We need to determine how to count dropouts, and the definition needs to be applied consistently statewide.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Too many students and they all have to make a certain grade or the school isn't going to get certain funding or whatever, the teachers are preoccupied with getting funded.

—TTC Student

Characteristics of the At-Risk Student

The big characteristic of the dropout student is that they can't read; they're probably reading on a second grade level, and their math skills are on the fifth grade level.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

The participants were asked whether they could identify students who were at risk and, if so, describe their characteristics. Teachers and counselors alike said that not only could they identify at-risk students, but they and their colleagues could often predict as early as kindergarten screenings which students would drop out.

My cousin teaches second grade, and she can tell which students are going to drop out and she has been right.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I've had kindergarten teachers tell me, "I can tell you who is going to be a problem in your ninth grade English."

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I first discover them in kindergarten screenings.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

After the first day or so of class you can. The first time you ask a kid to read and they can't.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I work with students who dropped out of metro schools or suspended and I can just about tell you who those kids are. They are kids with attendance problems and those who felt they would never catch up regardless of how much a teacher taught.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

The TTC students also said they could identify the at-risk students and make fairly accurate predictions about whether or not they would drop out. The characteristics mentioned across groups were typically consistent. It is important to note, however, that no two attributes were given more weight than the student's inability to read, or read with some proficiency and comprehension, and the student's home environment, i.e., non-traditional, non-supportive, and/or dysfunctional family environments. The participants felt

that one of these characteristics in and of itself, let alone a combination of these placed the student in an environment in which it would be very difficult to succeed. The teacher and counselor groups seemed to focus their discussions on reading issues, while the students seemed to place slightly greater emphasis on the socio-economic status of the family, saying the at-risk student is often poor, does not have the right clothes, and does not fit in socially. As one student said, “you can tell the at-risk kid, he’s the one who is wearing shoes from Wal-Mart.” Another said, “look for bruises; they might be physically abused at home.” The participants said that the at-risk student could exhibit some or all of the following characteristics:

- ➡ Cannot read or exhibits low reading and reading comprehension proficiencies
- ➡ Lives in a non-traditional, non-supportive, and/or dysfunctional family environment
- ➡ Exhibits low self-esteem
- ➡ Is disruptive in class
- ➡ Exhibits poor attendance patterns
- ➡ Is a low achiever
- ➡ Is involved in drugs and/or alcohol
- ➡ Is in the vocational education program

The groups discussed each of the characteristics in depth. A summary of the conversations follows:

Cannot Read or Displays Low Reading and Reading Comprehension Proficiencies

The most frequently mentioned characteristic of the at-risk student in the teacher/counselor groups was his/her inability to read or to read with some proficiency and comprehension. As one teacher stated, “If they can’t read, they can’t do anything.” The focus on reading skills continued as a

theme throughout each focus group meeting, with participants reiterating their belief throughout the discussions that “it all goes back to reading.” Comments reflective of those discussions follow:

The big characteristic of the dropout student is that they can't read; they're probably reading on a second grade level, and their math skills are on the fifth grade level. They come here (high school) not able to do the work. If you're reading on a second or third grade level, which is where a lot of them are, they're frustrated.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

They should not be in science and reading and math until they can read.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

By the time they get to me and they can't read, I have to teach them Gateway, and I can't teach it to them because they can't read.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

This all begins in kindergarten. In first grade today, you need to know a noun, a verb, a compound word, how to get along. Used to be you were taught how to tie your shoes, know your ABC's and progress from there. Why does a six year old need to know how to recognize a noun if he can't read?

—Teacher/Counselor Group

My husband graduated from high school, but he couldn't read his diploma.

—TTC Student

By the time you get to high school and you're not reading, it's going to be quite noticeable.

—TTC Student

Lives in a Non-Traditional, Non-Supportive, and/or Dysfunctional Family Environment

I can say from experience, I've been married ever since I dropped out of high school . . .and I've got kids who are in school now. What kids do in school has everything to do with what goes on at home. If your kids make bad grades in school and act bad in school, it's not the school's fault; it has nothing to do with the school, it has to do with what's going on back at the house.

—TTC Student

The TTC student groups described home lives where education was not encouraged or supported and family problems at times seemed insurmountable. In many cases, the students seemed eager to describe their own home situations, even though the moderator advised the groups at the beginning of the sessions not to share information that might make them feel uncomfortable. The stories told by the students were often heartbreaking, but the stories for sure brought to life the reality of their situations. They told of the intergenerational nature of the problem where parents dropped out of school, did not put a premium on education and exhibited little interest in their children's educations. Several other participants talked of their family's financial situations where the students were often expected to work and contribute to the rent or mortgage payments. The following comments are reflective of those discussions:

Lack of interest on the part of the parents. If you don't have nobody who cares. If I didn't go to school, there were no consequences at home.

—TTC Student

Dad worked third shift so when I came home from school he was getting up to go work. When I brought my grade card home, he just signed it. He didn't care. So when a friend offered me \$6 cash money to go to work for him, I took it. What did I want to go to school for? Nobody cared.

—TTC Student

I can say from experience, I've been married ever since I dropped out of high school. I've been married eleven years, and I've got kids who are in school now, just seeing, looking around and seeing, their classmates and how they act in school. What kids do in school has everything to do with what goes on at home. If your kids make bad grades in school and act bad in school, it's not the school's fault; it has nothing to do with the school, it has to do with what's going on back at the house.

—TTC Student

The teachers and counselors were very understanding about the at-risk student's home life but, of course, offered a less personal view of the situation. Also, the teachers and counselors pointed out that they are the ones left to deal with student behaviors that are the result of home environments without accountability, responsibility, discipline, and structure. One participant said, and other group members agreed, "We are their structure," a role they suggested they played to fill that void in the lives of the at-risk students. The following comments were taken from those discussions:

I've had three girls in the past three years who did not get a diploma because they refused to dress out for P.E. That was the only credit they needed. To me, that is just pure divine laziness and where parents don't care.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

At home, they're not held responsible for anything, so it's hard to get them to be responsible in the shop.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I think the kids who drop out don't want to be held accountable while they're here. They don't want to do their work, they don't even want to bring books to class, they don't want to have to turn in assignments, they don't want to have to meet certain standards. There are no standards at home, so they don't have to meet them anywhere else. A lot of them have very limited contact with custodians or parents. There is no kind of responsibility taught there, so when they come here, it kind of carries over to here, so when you tell a kid you have to complete a paper tomorrow, no consequences if they don't.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

When students are not in school, they're home because that is where he wants to be, because no one cares.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I notice when we have parent/teacher conferences, there are three parents who I know will be coming. No one else comes. There is such a lack of involvement here.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

A lot of them are from single parents and foster homes. Many are raised by grandparents.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

More and more homes are dysfunctional. We are finding that more and more students come from homes that have multiple families in them. There is less active supervision and interest at home. Kids are tending to raise themselves more than they did in the past.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Both parents work, and they work shifts. Parents aren't always home when the kids are. A lot of sophomores - seniors work. They're not around their parents.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

A student was complaining about being so tired so I asked her why she was working so much, she said that she had to. She was helping her family make the house payment. This kid is a very high achiever.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Usually I know before I get that waiver letter of request, that the letter is coming. Today it happened, a young man stopped me and said my birthday was yesterday. What does my daddy need to do cause I need to go on?

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I have several students right now who provide the sole income for their family. They are working at night and then for them to get up and be in class by 7:15 and be alert and focus is almost impossible.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I just had a foster child the last semester. He transferred in with good grades, the second six weeks he did well, the third six weeks he bombed out on exams because he just became focused on his mother was supposed to be in court and he was hoping that this time she wouldn't let him down and he was so involved in that.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Is Disruptive in Class

The participants said the at-risk student is often disruptive in class to cover up his inability to achieve academically and to cover up a myriad of other problems. However, several vocational education teachers said that when attending vocational education classes, the students' conduct often changed dramatically because they were able to achieve with their hands and feel successful. The following comments reflect those discussions:

He doesn't attend regularly. He doesn't do his homework routinely, and he puts his head down on the desk. Seeks negative attention. He disrupts your class or just quietly sleeps. He doesn't study for his tests, and he programs himself for failure.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

They'll [the students] do their work three or four months before they drop out and sometimes a year or two before. That really affects your classroom a lot. I asked a student who had quit doing his work, when do you turn eighteen, and he said May 14 so there's

no sense in my doing this work. Graduation was May 20, but he had been planning to drop out; he already had it planned out.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

That's how they cover up that they're struggling, through their behavior, rather than to show that they are not capable of doing something.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

He's going to be a troublemaker probably.

—TTC Student

Exhibits Poor Attendance Patterns

The participants said that many of the potential dropouts are just biding their time until the age when they can drop out. Their attendance at school is spotty at best and when there, either they do not participate in class or they disrupt the class. The following comments were taken from those discussions:

Attendance is not important to their parents, so it is not important to them.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

He's the one, bless his heart, when he is not here, you're kind of relieved. Because you know the class will run more smoothly that day.

—Teacher/ Counselor Group

Look at attendance first. If kids are missing school, there is something going on there.

—TTC Student

Is a Low Achiever

The participants said that the at-risk students tend to be low achievers who are rarely successful in the classroom. They are often held back for academic reasons but then are given a social promotion when they “no longer fit in the chair and are able to grow a beard.” Many of the participants debated the wisdom of the social promotion. While they understood that at some point a 15-year-old student from a social aspect needed to be with his age group, they felt that the promotion was not fair to the student because he had not attained and maybe never would attain grade-level skills. Nonetheless, students were routinely passed along at that point even though they could not read. TTC participants, however, were quick to point out that not all students who drop out are low achievers; students who drop out because they are pregnant or who are the fathers of the child can be high achievers.

They have a hard time keeping up in school. They can't do their work.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I've had more kids destroyed by being held back.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We just had a test and one of my students wrote on it, “I just can't do this.” When I graded the test, I wrote a note back that said, “you're not stupid,” and I wrote a few suggestions about how he

could improve. I asked him then if he had read my note, and he said “yes,” but that he just couldn’t do it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Our principal made us aware that statistically if somebody is held back for two years, they do not graduate from high school.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I don’t want to water down the curriculum. What we are doing is not working, so we just keep doing it again. I want our kids to excel, but we’re grading them on did they show up on time, did they do this work sheet and if they did, we give them 100. So we have kids who are passing classes in biology, but they don’t understand it. They just know how to fill out a work sheet or format an outline but they don’t know the information.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Drugs and Alcohol

The TTC students, in particular, believed that drug and alcohol use was very characteristic of the at-risk student. They told of their own personal experiences with drugs and alcohol and concluded that it was an easy choice to do drugs and alcohol and hang out with women/men rather than attend school. In addition, the Tech students said that not only were the students involved in drugs and alcohol, but so were their parents.

I had some kids talk about the “four-twenty rule.” I kept hearing it, so I asked what is the four-twenty rule? At four-twenty is when they’re smoking pot, getting pregnant, and getting in trouble.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Today, you have two parents on drugs, and so you have kids who have to deal with their parents and job wise, you have two parents working.

—TTC Student

Drugs are a problem here. It's not hard at all. There's your buddy sitting next to you in class saying, hey let's go get high, and you get into that cycle and it's hard to get out.

—TTC Student

It's a combination of a lot of things. I wouldn't say I hung out with the wrong crowd, I think the wrong crowd hung out with me. As a matter of fact, I think I was detrimental to them. There were a lot of factors; we didn't have the most money in the world. I was smoking dope and chasing girls and drinking beer and all that stuff. When you go to school, you're not going to get a lot done.

—TTC Student

Lack of interest happens because you'd rather be out doing other things. You're really not catching the stuff. Drugs, women, and alcohol decrease your interest. You're not going to go so why waste your time. Get a job and buy your drugs and alcohol.

—TTC Student

I enjoyed sitting around, waking up, making me a big bowl of Fruity Pebbles, and smoking a big joint. It was like, school, who needs this?

—TTC Student

Self-Esteem

Many of the participants perceived that students who were at risk suffered from low self-esteem. The students also pointed out that many special classes that were geared toward helping low-achievers worked counter to the goal. Rather, the students perceived that the programs were regular academic programs but “dumbed down.” Several participants recommended that policymakers consider the message they are sending—that low-achievers are not expected to achieve. Because of the perceived low expectations for the low-achieving students other factors such as their family’s low socio-economic status, students felt that they were different and that they did not fit in. Other students countered, saying that self-esteem was not an issue with them. Further, a few participants claimed that they came from good homes; they just got in with the wrong crowd. The students offered these comments regarding that issue:

You need to change some things about the system. You need to make the system work more for the student and just don’t put in a drop out prevention program, because you’re just labeling them and then, you’ve just done them an injustice. Don’t label them.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Special classes are thought to be the same classes but with lower expectations, so that makes you feel even dumber and your friends know that you are doing the same work, but not expected to make high grades.

—TTC Student

Kids probably want to learn, but they’re too embarrassed or too ashamed because people make fun of them.

—TTC Student

Is in the Vocational Education Program

Most dropouts are in vocational education.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Low achievers are in vocational education. It's a place of last resort for the kids.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Sometimes vocational education is the best alternative for them.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Why Do Students Drop Out of School?

When the participants were asked why they believed students dropped out of school, they described a complex problem with multiple factors contributing to that decision. However, they said that the following factors played a major role:

- ➡ Students get behind and cannot catch up
- ➡ One size fits all approach to education
- ➡ Problems at home
- ➡ Peer pressure
- ➡ Pregnancy
- ➡ Transition from middle to high school

Students Get Behind and Cannot Catch Up

One of the primary reason that students drop out is that they get behind and cannot catch up. Elementary school teachers and counselors said that even as early as kindergarten, they see incredible disparities among the students' maturity and skills levels. While some students exhibit maturity and reading readiness in the earliest grades, other students are struggling to tie their shoes, count to ten, and identify primary colors. The participants agreed that interventions to bring students close to grade level needed to begin in the elementary grades but, for certain, had to be a goal for the students' middle school years, years the majority of the participants agreed were crucial to a student's development. Many of the participants felt that when at-risk students began their high school years, they were already well behind and discouraged by their situations. Teachers and counselors alike said that their conversations with these students often reflected a sense of hopelessness and the student's belief that dropping out would just be easier and that school was just not worthwhile. The following comments reflect the discussions about students getting behind and not being able to catch up:

I have one student who is 16 and has one credit. He can't see any reason to keep going.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We're losing a lot of them before they even get to the high school. The middle school is at much at fault in losing kids as the high school. When they put these value added programs on us teachers in the middle schools and they have to show progress, they are moving so fast that if the kid sneezes, he misses it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We talked about it this a.m. When you have a freshman coming into this school at 16 years old because they failed so many times

at elementary and middle school, then I think they'll be 20 when they graduate, so by the time they get 18, they just quit.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We get students who transfer here in eighth grade and higher who are already behind. It's hard to get them caught up.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I taught at middle school for 20 years. You will have students who are 15 and 16 and in the eighth grade, and they will say, "I can't wait to quit school." They want to quit because they are so far behind. A lot of them cannot read or make a simple sentence. And, they feel like there is no chance, no hope for them. So they feel like, I'll drop out and go to the GED program and that will get me through.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

It seems with students once they get behind for whatever reason, they're not with their graduating class, they feel, I can't do it, so why try. Then I get comments that when I'm 17, I can drop out and take the GED. They think the GED is an easier way than sitting in the classroom.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I've heard parents say at the middle school level that their kids are bringing two and three hours worth of homework a night. Isn't that a bit excessive? It starts making the kids hate school. They get behind.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I had a student who came in last week when we were testing for Gateway. He filled out his bubbles in 2 minutes tops and left. I walked out behind him and asked, if he didn't want to try on this math test and he said, I really don't. I talked to him about the possibility for a real diploma and he said, No, when I get out of here, I'm going to make more money than you in masonry, but I don't need a diploma. Yea, I'd like to have one, but I'm not good in this math.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I'm from the middle school and I bristle when I hear high school counselors talk. I know what they are saying in our defense, that's how I feel about the elementary school. We keep passing the buck. We keep passing the buck when it comes to academics. Middle school is 5 - 8. There is a huge number of students who do not know their multiplication tables and if you wait for that to happen, they'll drop out in the middle school. Whether they drop out at the high school level or middle school, they're going to drop out and so you keep moving them on because they are a detriment because you've got a fifteen year old in the fifth grade, that's a significant problem.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

When I quit school, I was 17 years old and in the ninth grade. I couldn't read when I quit school; I learned to read after I quit school. Nobody offered help. I wasn't tested for dyslexia or anything like that. I've never been tested for it, but from what I've learned over the years, I am dyslexic because when I read, my mind leaves words out. They move you on because of size and age. I am 54 years old, and I have a granddaughter who is now twelve and having the same experience . . . moved on because of her size and

age and getting pushed through the system. She's failed two years and is reading on the third grade level.

—TTC Student

It would be important to note here that in a few groups, participants thought that parents were choosing to home school to circumvent the age requirement for dropping out and also to ease the pressure on their children who were not able to achieve grade level skills. An urban group in particular brought up the topic of home schooling saying it was a way to work around the age minimum although they did not believe home schooling was prevalent to the degree that it would have much of an impact on drop out rates. These participants however were not convinced that some of the students who dropped out for that purpose were actually being home schooled.

Many of the teachers, counselors and older students were also concerned about the at risk student's naïve attitude about what life would be like once they dropped out. Several vocational education teachers in particular said that the students believed that getting a GED would be an easy alternative to earning the high school diploma and they could not be convinced otherwise. One vocational education teacher told about the occasions when he tried to convince students that they faced a future of minimum wage jobs unless they planned at least to attend a trade school. But as one technology student so wisely observed, "at age 17, you couldn't tell me anything," suggesting that in many cases the dropout student would have to learn on his own the consequences of his decision to drop out.

A lot of kids I know are going with home school programs right now, so they can get their studies done with real quick and then go to work.

—TTC Student

I've had two kids and one I took out of school (home schooled). To me, what the biggest problem was if you have a struggling student, they don't get the help they need. My 17 year old was put on Ritalin and he didn't need it anymore than I did. But when they put him in a special class and they told him he was ADD, he took advantage of it. Him and other kids in the class were tearing up and cutting up and no one was paying attention to it. I talked to the teacher and she said, well he has ADS. Teacher let everything he did slide and I told her I didn't want that.

—TTC Student

One Size Fits All Approach to Education

Everyone who graduates from high school has to pass the Algebra 1 Gateway Exam. Everyone in high school cannot pass the exam.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Across groups, the debate regarding reasons why students drop out included impassioned discussions of what the participants termed the “one size fits all” approach to education, where students of varying academic capabilities were held to one educational attainment standard and the college track was the priority. Most of the participants found it unreasonable that all students, regardless of skill levels, were expected to pass standardized tests and achieve in the same manner. Further, several participants perceived that the increased emphasis on test scores, especially the Gateway tests, would only contribute to higher dropout rates. In the era of “No Child Left Behind”, they argued, many students are going to be left behind. Comments from those discussions follow:

The problem is that you're dealing with politicians who say we're going to fix it by setting mandates in high school where you are going to have to pass this test or that test, where the problem is that these children who are coming up, who are 10, 12 years old, need to be tested to find out what they're really capable of and splitting them off. The ones who can do that, let them do that, but the ones who are struggling and who can be mechanics, and other things, we need to get them into that curriculum so they can succeed.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Everyone who graduates from high school has to pass the Algebra 1 Gateway exam. Everyone in high school cannot pass the exam.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We are going to have to address this issue in one of two ways. One, we can continue with this myth of mass education for the groups, or we can start doing something similar to the Japanese and hit an eighth grade level and test them and if they have mechanical aptitude, let's put them in a school and get them out of this college bound stuff. And, they would enjoy it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

A lady I've known all my life is a retired educator and made a comment once that education had gone to pot. The hamburger needs hamburger flippers.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We have to get over this myth that everybody has got to be a college graduate and everybody has got to have certain achievements.

We've got to come to the idea that the world requires all kinds of talents and all kinds of levels of jobs.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Used to have technical math. But no more, because they want them to pass the Gateway Algebra test and with No Child Left Behind, I think the dropout rate is going to get worse.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We have no choice but to leave children behind when you set the standards we have. Every child cannot accomplish those and every child won't.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

And, we are a test-oriented society. Used to be if you didn't know your times tables in the elementary grade, they stayed on that concept until you learned your times tables. Now, because we have to cover this by a particular time period and that by a particular time period, the kids are falling behind.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I have a student right now who is a junior in my class who is probably going to be the best hairdresser I've had in a long time, and she is planning to do that. She has failed the Gateway twice. But in her hands-on stuff, she is wonderful. Anything I tell her she can do, and I don't have to tell her twice. It is very discouraging to her and very disheartening to me. She is a sweet girl and very intelligent. She is going to be a great hairdresser, but if she can't graduate high school because she can't pass the Gateway. . . .

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I wouldn't do very well in my class if I came here in ninth grade and doing work on the fourth and fifth grade levels; they're just set-up to fail.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

My grandson is in first grade. He came home and said he couldn't do it. He said they're talking about parts of speech and diagramming sentences. He was crying and stressed out.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Take him out of the car seat at 4 and put him in kindergarten at 5.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

In my class, I'm not teaching anything different that I haven't taught, but I'm needing to teach it in a different way and it's (Gateway) eating up my class time. I'm having to give up some other things to teach it in a different way. I've always taught everything that is on the Gateway and I always will, but the way it's being done and the way it's being mandated is altering my class.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Even in vocational education. I've been here for 21 years and in the last few years, they've handed me a list of standards that take away from my classroom and hands on.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

They have to know the basics of course, but students have to figure some of it out on their own.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

You cannot take some of the vocational education classes without taking Algebra 1 first. Now you tell me how that is helping our kids. Special education kids have to take the Algebra 1. Our kids in special education?

—Teacher/Counselor Group

So, where do we set the level? There has got to be a level/standard. Not everyone is going to be on grade level ever.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Where do we set the level where there is a base education that everyone has to achieve?

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Peer Pressure

The students, in particular, said that peer pressure played a role in a student's decision to drop out. The following comments summarized that thinking:

I think a lot of it is peer pressure. Sometimes you don't fit in, and I think that's a lot of it. I graduated in 1996 and still remember when I went to elementary school and everyone knew everyone and it was closer. Then we had to go to high school, and we were bussed to the big school, and we had never been around that many

students. So, when you get to that, it's just you're another number and nobody cares.

—TTC Student

There is a lot of pressure to fit in, and you don't fit in when you're poor. You just don't fit in with the type of people who make good grades in school.

—TTC Student

You don't have a car and riding the bus at 17, you just ain't cool. You ain't it. It's just not normal. When it's time to get your driver's license, it's time to quit riding the bus.

—TTC Student

I'd sooner walk to school than take the bus.

—TTC Student

Pregnancy

The TTC students, felt that pregnancy was a primary reason students of all academic attainment levels dropped out. They pointed out that teen pregnancy was not necessarily a socio-economic issue.

I've had them quit school because they have to earn money, the fathers now, to take care of the babies. The girls tend to stay in school if they can get daycare because they can get money.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I didn't drop out for that reason, I wanted to stay in, but I had medical reasons for dropping out.

—TTC Student

Some people drop out because they get married early, or some people drop out just because of frustration.

—TTC Student

In my situation, I got married early.

—TTC Student

I think the main reason is because of teen pregnancy. About 25.0 percent of my class got pregnant in the tenth grade, and so they dropped out.

—TTC Student

Problems at Home

The students used this time in the discussion to focus once again on issues related to the at-risk student's home life, saying that it all begins and ends in the home. A technology student challenged his group to debate what he believed to be the heart of the problem, socio-economic issues. The following comment was his challenge:

There is one question that is real important to ask and you're not asking and that I think is real important, that is the economic issue. How were they raised? Were their families old, middle class families or wealthy families? And then you're going to find out where the dropouts are going to be and it's not going to be in the upper class

and it's not going to be in the middle class, it's going to be the poor kids. The participants agreed with him. He then asked for a show of hands, "how many of you were poor?" and the majority raised their hands.

The following comments reflect additional family issues that the participants said played a role in a student's decision to drop out:

The parents may not be encouraging them to drop out, but they're not encouraging them to come to school.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

They won't make an effort to try. I give open book tests, and I've had students come to me and say, I don't know this word; I have no idea what it says. I think these kids have just come to a point where life is not worth it and school is not worth it. I had a kid tell me yesterday that all he wanted to do was get away from home.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We have a lot of parents who do not value education. It's like, I can't get my kid up to go to school. They don't have any control over their child.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Sometimes it's a family cycle. If the parents didn't finish school, they're not going to finish either.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We have a lot of parents who do not have a high school diploma; it is not important to them, so it is not important to the students. I have had a lot of parents come in and couldn't understand why their kid at 16 couldn't quit.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

You're still looking at a parenting situation and an economic situation, and I still think those are the top two reasons why students drop out.

—TTC Student

If I would have had a father there to tell me that if I missed another day of school, he'd whip my butt, that would probably have encouraged me to keep going to school, but I was just raised by my mother along with two brothers.

—TTC Student

There were seven children in my family, and me and my younger sister were the only two to graduate from school. My parents were uneducated, the both of them. My mother went to school until about the about the fifth grade, and my father went until about the seventh grade. I don't think they pushed us because they didn't understand the need for the education because they weren't educated.

—TTC Student

I think it's different for everyone. For me it was financial. My Dad got laid off and money was pretty tight and I got a job.

—TTC Student

I dropped out to help my Mom and Dad.

—TTC Student

Transition from Middle to High School

Many of the participants felt that the transition from middle school to high school was a very critical time in the life of an adolescent. In addition to dealing with changes in their lives associated with entering their teen years, they leave behind the familiar middle school environment and support system and enter into an environment where they are expected to be academically and emotionally prepared for the dramatic changes in school structure, class scheduling, and personal responsibility. Participants in each of the groups said that at-risk students are not always able to make that transition, especially those who are academically behind. Many participants urged policymakers to focus on these transitional years, especially when planning strategies to retain students. The comments from the discussions follow:

When they get to high school, they're no longer babied, and you don't hold their hand. They're on their own, and they have six different teachers and six different teachers can't call Mom every time something is going wrong. They really get lost, and they're not prepared academically or emotionally.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

One thing I think is that any time you are in transition, going from eighth grade to high school, sometimes that support system is gone. You're growing and making a change.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

In elementary school, kids have the same teachers who teach the same subjects. When they go to middle school and high school, they rotate through teachers. I think that has an impact on them.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

What is changing is we're dumping vocational programs. I think that's a real negative change. And the four-year plans haven't helped any. I think the four-year plans are a huge detriment because we lock kids in the eighth grade into four-year plans before they even step into high school, they don't know what the programs are. They barely even know themselves in terms of life and what they want and we send them out signed, sealed and delivered with a four-year plan and they're locked into it unless someone is aggressive about it in saying do you want to make any changes. Those kids have no idea about how to go down and change a four-year plan.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Do Students Regret Dropping Out?

Many of the students said they regretted dropping out of school almost the moment they did so. Primarily, they regretted not graduating with their class, and once away from the high school environment, they regretted not being able to interact with their own age group on a daily basis. However several students in each group countered, saying that was not the case with them; they did not regret dropping out. For example, one participant said he dropped out during the Viet Nam era to enlist in the military; he retired 26 years later. He believed that he would not have been any better off had he stayed in school and graduated. Another student said he did not regret dropping out, he regretted not getting the education. This comment seemed to summarize the thinking of many students: that school is a social and academic experience,

and that socially they did not fit in and academically they could not achieve. For many of them, school was not a very good experience.

The discussions also served to highlight the TTC students' level of life and career expectations and aspirations. Participants in rural East Tennessee, in particular, said that the economic conditions in their communities were discouraging; they spoke of numerous factory closings with little hope of new businesses locating in the area. Yet when questioned about whether they would leave the area in search of better opportunities, many seemed surprised by the thought. They said they would not because their community was where their families lived, and it was where they felt most comfortable. A sample of the comments from the TTC student groups follows:

I regretted it the night my class graduated. I drove by drunk really regretting I wasn't in there with the rest of them, but it was too late then.

—TTC Student

Students who drop out might think they are better off, but that is only temporary.

—TTC Student

Dropping out? I'm no worse off. After eleventh grade, I just didn't go back. The day they started back, I went and got my GED. I knew what I was doing, and I don't regret it. That diploma wouldn't have gotten me any further than the GED. I was working at the time I dropped out, and I went to a Christian school where we didn't have a coop. The choice between keeping my job and going back to school; I chose to keep my job.

—TTC Student

A lot of people drop out of school, I'm into this job, I've been doing this job for 20 years, and I'll do this job until I retire. So, unless there is something out there that keys a person to further education, in order to really peak their interest or shows that economically in this region there is something that is going to change, why should they do it? They've got to have a reason to make that change.

—TTC Student

Jobs in these regions are not plentiful. Regardless, the job at McDonald's—whether you have a degree from Harvard or you are a high school dropout with a GED—the job is the same. Look at the area, they have a college degree, and they're working at McDonald's.

—TTC Student

A lot of people are unmotivated to do anything with their lives anyway. You wake up, and it's a feeling of a robotic town. You have people who are robots doing the same thing with their lives everyday, and I think it's depressing.

—TTC Student

People are not going to leave because it's home and it's all they know.

—TTC Student

Two students who chose to stay in school rather than drop out offered these comments:

Fathers of the children drop out also. I had a young man who had been in high school for three years and had no credits, nor could he read. And he said to me man, I would feel so good if I could read the words under Michael Jordan's picture. He said the only reason he was staying in school was because his girlfriend was pregnant with his second child and he wanted something better for his children. But he was seventeen and in ninth grade for three years and no credits.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I didn't drop out, but I seen my brother drop out. So, I regretted it for the rest of the family. I almost dropped out, but I just kept going, it was like hey, I'm going to be the first one in my family to graduate from high school. I felt like it was something that I had to do. At the same time, I grew up really poor, and I wanted to accomplish something in life.

—TTC Student

Until education gives total support to children who are not doing well, you're going to have dropouts.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

What Barriers Do Teachers and Counselors Face in Addressing the Drop-Out Problem?

The teachers and counselors said that they faced numerous barriers in dealing with problems of the at risk student. First and foremost, they often had to deal with uncooperative parents or guardians, program cuts, lack of resources - staff in particular, and large class sizes. They were extremely critical of the cuts that were being made particularly in vocational education programs. Participants felt that opportunities and course offerings needed to be increased rather than cut. They argued that the at risk student often felt successful in vocational education programs because for example, difficult math concepts could be visualized and given meaning when students worked with their hands. Comments about the barriers that teachers and counselors face when addressing the drop out problem follow:

We get ninth grade students we know who have problems. I think a mentor would help. I think we need to have a program in place for when they start to fail classes, then you get those kids and you work one on one with them. We have discussed mentoring programs and that is something that could actually come in place this year.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We're putting more pressure on teachers and then they can't even use their creativity. Teachers are some of the most creative people we have. If they were allowed to look at that student and be creative, we'd be a whole lot better off.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We offer tutoring here in the areas where the students have to pass the tests and not many come. You see, there's an attitude.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I don't know how they contact the middle school parents but I see kids who failed a lot of their basic skills and I know we advertise in the papers and I know we send home letters saying we have tutors....I don't know, but I think those parents should be called in and told if you want you child to go onto the next grade level, maybe after school tutoring is something you will have to do.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

The programs are funded for three to five years and right when you start to make progress, the program is cut. We have to do it long enough for teachers to buy into it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Summer youth program was awesome and then it was cut.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We lost the vocational rehabilitation program.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I think it starts (EC) extenuating circumstance promotions/social promotion and some years ago, I had a counseling program for that purpose. Because of their age and because they have a beard now, or because they're too large for the eighth grade, they send them up to high school just because they're stamped EC they would somehow succeed. We had a program and we started with forty students and we were to follow them along and they had the same counselor and the same principle. We had a number of students and somebody was in charge to see them through the day, but you can't do that with such a large number. We don't have enough teachers, we don't have enough counselors, it's off the wall.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We don't have time.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Our counselors do a good job, but they're just spread so thin.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

When you're trying to help those two children in your classroom not get behind, you are helping the twenty-eight others slip behind.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Work with hands and not just minds. A place where students can take place in group projects or work alone and achieve. Students who act out in the academic classroom often do not in vocational education classes.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

In some instances the best thing for a student is to drop out get a GED and go to a tech center. I think we're expecting each kid to be the same. I'd love to be a brain surgeon, but I'm not capable and every kid is not capable of doing the same thing.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

There are kids that need to get the training and perform manual labor. We need manual labor, we have to have computer techs. We're telling our kids that to be capable and successful, you need to do this or you're nothing.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

We've had students in building trades and some of these shop classes that had they stayed in academic classes would have just been frustrated. They go into vocational education classes and get hands on experience and take interest in a project.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I have kids in my class right now with single parents and not much of a home life. When you brag on those kids, you boost their self-esteem. They'll do anything in the world you ask them to. But, put them back in the traditional math class and they'll turn a desk on you.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Sometimes vocational education can turn a student around because it is so hands on.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

If you can't be a brain surgeon its okay. Be a plumber, carpenter or electrician.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

If you chose the vocational path, for vocational jobs that require more education, learning and ability, than a brain surgeon. A lot of times, vocational is viewed as an easy way through. If you can't read and can't so simple math, you have no business in vocational.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Vocational needs to start in middle school. Teach them why they need to learn math.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

A lot of them don't see a need to learn math and measurements in a classroom,, but take them out here and put them in a vocational class and they have to learn how to measure a 2x4 to cut it right to make it fit the wall, and they'll do it and remember how to do it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Some can do the $2 + 2 = 4$ math, some are good at it, but real world problems in math are not $2+2=4$, it's word problems, problem solving and if they can't read, they can't do those problems.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I'm a vocational education student! I went through high school with three years of radio and television and you can see what it did for me. At that time there was no peer pressure and differentiation between who went into it. You just chose it because if you had an interest in it, you could do it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Today kids think they're not smart enough to get into college, so I'm just going to get into vocational.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

I was in the child care program that helped me decide where to go to school. I learned there what to expect. It gave me a great view.

—TTC Student

Prevention Programs

The participants were asked if specific prevention programs were in place in their schools to respond to the student dropout issue. Most participants felt there were programs that could benefit the at risk students, but perhaps in an indirect manner. The problem for rural east Tennessee students was that many of the programs were offered after school and because many of the students lived great distances from the school and transportation was an issue, the students who could benefit the most were not able to participate.

The comments of the teachers and counselors suggested they took a personal interest in the at risk student and attempted to counsel them in a manner that they thought might be beneficial. The TTC students agreed that some teachers did attempt to help them, and a few of the students did provide accounts of teachers going out of their way to attempt to help them succeed. For example:

I remember instances in school when I didn't do well in a certain class; I had the one teacher who was a history teacher he just stopped me one day, everyone else had left the class and he told me, I know you can do better. I knew I could. So, I made a better grade the next semester. But, I didn't have the drive to make better grades. I could get by. Had I set my mind to it, I could have done a lot better, I know I could.

—TTC Student

Further the students were very insistent that it was the teachers that they would chose to confide in, not counselors. Many of the students said they did not even know where the counselors offices were located and they shared the

view that counselors were disciplinarians rather than mentors. In addition, the students could not imagine sharing their deepest concerns with a counselor, a person whom they probably met with once or twice during their high school career. They added that when they considered dropping out, they discussed the issue with their closest friends and rarely anyone else. The teachers concurred that they were the ones within the education system who would be most appropriate to counsel and support the students because they were with the students more hours out of the day than even their parents. Comments from those discussions included:

Do not go to teachers or counselors, only to friends. Counselors aren't in touch.

—TTC Student

I felt like the counselors looked at the grades you made and then decided what area you might fit into.

—TTC Student

When I was in school, if anyone found out you went to the counselor, they made fun of you. The only time I saw the counselor was when I was walking by that office.

—TTC Student

One of the most important assessments from this discussion came from students. Several participants said that they could have been talked out of dropping out but in some cases, no one tried.

What Components Would You Recommend For an Ideal Program to Reduce the Number Of Dropouts?

The participants were asked to create an ideal program with a goal of helping the at risk students become successful in school and reduce the likelihood of his dropping out. The participants said that first and foremost, the program had to begin at the earliest time possible. One participant's comments seemed to summarize the opinion, "find him soon and then remediate." No one argued when participants across all groups said that the time to start was kindergarten. Further, no one argued when technology students proposed more aggressive measures where school personnel knocked on doors and attempted to sell parents and guardians on the value of an education. The majority also agreed that the ideal program had to contain a very strong and aggressive reading component. Other recommendations for the ideal program to reduce the number of drop outs follows:

I would always focus at the middle school level and again, that would always be reading. They've got to read and we've got to find a way to get them to read.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Diversify the program to meet the needs of the child.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Early intervention. Be honest with parents about student's difficulties.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Us as teachers need to be honest with parents and not sugar coat what is going on. Parents need to understand, your child has a problem, let's work on it.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

It will have to be done through early intervention, not when they get up to be a junior.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

At the kindergarten screening, children who were not ready and not mature, be put in a preschool situation. And get off of this, if they're five years old, they should be in kindergarten and if they're six years old, they should be in first grade. If they are not ready to learn, we are defeating our purpose and we are setting up a cycle for them to fail.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Drug education needs to start early because we have more problems with drugs in middle school than we do in high school.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Should be some sort of reading program. They should be kept in the reading program continually, continually, continually until they learn to read because they can't do anything math, history anything until they learn to read.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Needs to be an ongoing monitoring of reading skills and a good diagnosis of what to do for that child. Often we know there is a problem, but we do not address the problems.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

The perfect student retention program should produce students who are prepared to go out into life, not just graduate.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

Need to start in kindergarten. Actually, let's start at birth, let's start with that parent taking time out to be with that child and to read to it and to talk to that four year old.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

They need safety nets all the way through school.

—Teacher/Counselor Group

You hear about programs, special to do this, special to do that, but I don't see much is going to help in that situation. Special programs aren't going to make parents make more money, programs aren't going to out and buy you new clothes. Parents and economics. Programs aren't going to help that.

—TTC Student

How about going to the child's home and sitting down with parents and children. You have to get the parents involved.

—TTC Student

There should have been a program to help my parents learn how to deal with me.

—TTC Student

Conclusions and Recommendations

Finally the participants were asked to take a minute to reflect on their group's discussion and determine what important points emerged and what conclusions about the issues they thought policy makers charged with developing strategies to address problems of the at risk student should be made aware of. The participants restated their beliefs that reading was the key, that not all students were capable of achieving at the same levels, and that a wide range of programs for the at risk student be added to the curriculum and particularly vocational education programs rather than taken away.

They asked policy makers to consider that not all students wanted to go to college and that the world needed skilled labor. All children, they argued, not just the college track students needed a basic education where academic and vocational interests were blended and the goal of education was to prepare students not just for a good career job but also for a good quality of life job.

Recommendations

The participants offered these specific recommendations. The rationale statements are a summary of a variety of opinions from across the groups.

- ➡ Determine a child's learning style. One thing very important is if early, we can determine that child's learning style. We could do an IAP and put them where their strengths are. But we put them all together and we're so into this testing. Their strengths are in so many different areas and we crush their self-esteem. We try to cram them into that standardized track. Maybe have the Gateway standards where they have to pass the Gateway if they are on the college path, but if not go

back and set a different standard. You could graduate with two different kinds of diplomas. Instead of calling it a degree, declare a focus. I have students who are very gifted in music but horrible at everything else they do, then that is where their talent is and that is where they should focus and develop that.

- ➡ Lower student teacher ratios. We are mentors. We know some of these kids better than their parents do because we're with them a lot. We need more time and resources. I don't think the teachers need to do it all. I think there needs to be a program where they hire people to come in and do it. The teachers do too much. The state in a private beauty school, they say for every 10 students, you need to have one instructor. Here at the vocational school here, I am allowed to have up to twenty students. It is very hard to give the twenty students the attention that they need. It would make my job so much easier if I had a junior instructor. You have thirty-five students and you're supposed to do one on one? It's impossible.
- ➡ Provide transportation for after school activities. A lot of students would love to participate in the after school programs but transportation is a big problem here. A lot of them sit on the bus for an hour. Some of our major attendance problems are with kids who live the furthest away from the school. Also, since the students are in clustered scheduling, provide everything within that cluster to eliminate driving.
- ➡ Develop an advisory board for policy makers comprised of teachers, counselors and students. I would like policy makers to ask us our opinions instead of setting a policy without talking to people who are closest to the issues and deal with them on a day to day basis.
- ➡ Develop parent education programs. You have a lot of parents where education is not important. Make home visits with the parents like social workers do. Have a set of tutors come in then and work with them, they could be college students who would counsel the parents about how important their child's education is.
- ➡ Provide consistency and support for student programs. The last 5 or 6 years there was a big push with preschool, but this past year, preschool money was cut. In the past there was money put into parenting and

then all that money was cut. Every time the governor changes, president changes, we get a new agenda. There has to be consistency.

- ➔ Strengthen the vocational education programs. We need vocational education back, they have totally wiped it out. There were seven coordinators in my area but now, six of them are gone. They took out too much and why, I don't understand. Expand computer course offerings including web design. Have these classes available, quit taking away. We're not leaving them anything. The schools need coop programs that place students in organizations in the community where they can gain first hand knowledge of the working world. I used to be a coop teacher and I found it amazing that once the students went out to work, their maturity level jumped overnight. In addition add auto mechanics, keyboarding, cooking and diversified health programs not only to provide career choices for the students, but to provide the workforce that is consistent with the needs of the community. We are developing low-skill workers for low-skill jobs. Vocational education is a dumping ground with no real track to get the students anything that is quality. What are they going to do with a diploma that says I know family consumer science? What does that mean and where do they go with it. We're building all of these buildings in the community, but we're not training our students to build them. Until education gives total support to children who are not doing well, you're going to have dropouts.

Appendix A

Sample Letter to Project Representative For the Teacher and Counselor Focus Group Meetings

Dear Project Representative,

The Tennessee Council on Vocational Education (TCOVE) has requested that the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) of The University of Memphis conduct a series of focus group meetings in school districts and Technology Centers throughout Tennessee to examine issues related to the student dropout problem. Your school district has been selected to participate in the study. I will be in East Tennessee from November 3–6 to moderate the meetings.

The purpose of the focus groups will be to assess the perceptions of teachers and counselors about a variety of issues related to the dropout problem. In a roundtable meeting format, the focus group participants will be presented with specific discussion issues and with the guidance of the moderator, debate them informally as a group. The ideas, opinions, and recommendations of these individuals will provide invaluable information that will help TCOVE plan strategies to respond to the problem.

TCOVE and SBBER are requesting your support for the project. SBBER will also need your assistance in selecting the focus group participants and meeting location and helping to ensure that the selected teachers and counselors attend their session. I am providing you with some information that I believe will be helpful to you in this task. I greatly appreciate your help.

- ➡ You may select your group members or ask for volunteers. Only teachers and counselors whom you believe have firsthand knowledge of issues related to the dropout problem should be invited to attend.
- ➡ A focus group is limited to between 10 and 12 members. When forming your group, you should attempt to include a mix of counselors and teachers. Vocational education teachers, in particular, should be included since national studies indicate that a sizable percentage of dropouts nationwide are in vocational education programs. Principals and superintendents are not to be included.
- ➡ Invite the teachers and counselors to participate in the focus group meeting at least two weeks prior to their scheduled session to reduce the possibility of a scheduling conflict.
- ➡ Select a meeting site. A conference room that holds 12 people plus the moderator comfortably would be ideal.

- ➡ Distribute to each participant a copy of the Focus Group Participant Letter which I have included. The letter should help answer participants' questions about the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation in their meeting. Please fill in your meeting schedule.
- ➡ Two days before your scheduled meeting distribute a reminder memo that restates the meeting date, time, and location.

The focus group participants will be encouraged to be open and honest in their discussions. The Bureau cannot guarantee the confidentiality of their comments as the discussions will be held in a group setting. However, at no time will the participants' individual responses appear in any reports based on this research, and all references to their identify will be removed from all records that we maintain.

I will be in touch with you as we get closer to your meeting date to respond to any questions you might have. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Andrea L. Orchik, Senior Research Associate
Bureau of Business and Economic Research
The University of Memphis
330 Deloach Street, Suite 221
Memphis, TN 38152
Ph: 901-678-5040
Fax: 901-678-4086
E-mail: alorchik@memphis.edu

Appendix B

Sample Letter to Project Representative for The Tennessee Technology Group Meetings

Dear Project Representative:

The Tennessee Council on Vocational Education (TCOVE) has requested that the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) of The University of Memphis conduct a series of focus group meetings in school districts and Technology Centers throughout Tennessee to examine issues related to the student dropout problem. The Tennessee Technology Center/Nashville has been selected to participate in the study.

The purpose of the focus groups in the Tennessee Technology Centers will be to assess the perceptions of students about a variety of issues related to the dropout problem. In a round-table meeting format, the students will be presented with specific discussion issues and with the guidance of the moderator debate them informally as a group. The ideas, opinions, and recommendations of the students will provide invaluable information that will help TCOVE plan strategies to respond to the problem.

TCOVE and SBBER are requesting your support for the project. SBBER will also need your assistance in selecting the students and meeting location and helping to ensure that the students attend their meeting. I am providing you with some information that I believe will be helpful to you in this task. I greatly appreciate your help.

- ➡ You may select the group members or ask for volunteers. Please limit your selection to between 10–12 students who dropped out of school and who are attending the Technology Center. Also, could you include in the group, several students who contemplated dropping out of school but did not.
- ➡ If appropriate, invite the students at least two weeks prior to their scheduled session to reduce the possibility of a scheduling conflict.
- ➡ Select a meeting site. A conference room that holds 12 people plus the moderator comfortably would be ideal.
- ➡ Distribute to each participant a copy of the Focus Group Participant Letter which I have included. The letter should help answer the students' questions about the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation in their meeting. Please fill in your meeting schedule. Your meeting is scheduled for 10:00 a.m., November 13, 2003.
- ➡ Two days before your scheduled meeting, distribute a reminder memo that restates the meeting date, time, and location.

- ➡ The focus group participants will be encouraged to be open and honest in their discussions. We are very aware of the sensitivity of dropout issues. The moderator will present the issues to the students in a non-threatening manner and in a way that does not become personal in nature.
- ➡ The Bureau cannot guarantee the confidentiality of the students' comments as the discussions will be held in a group setting. However, at no time will the participants' individual responses appear in any reports based on this research, and all references to their identify will be removed from all records that we maintain.

I will be in touch with you as we get closer to your meeting date to respond to any questions you might have. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Andrea L. Orchik, Senior Research Associate

Bureau of Business and Economic Research

The University of Memphis

330 Deloach Street, Suite 221

Memphis, TN 38152

Ph: 901-678-5040

Fax: 901-678-4086

E-mail: alorchik@memphis.edu

Appendix C

Introductory Letter to Participants in the Teacher and Counselor Groups

Dear Focus Group Participant:

The Tennessee Council on Vocational Education (TCOVE) has requested that the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) of The University of Memphis conduct a series of focus group meetings in school districts and Technology Centers throughout Tennessee to examine issues related to the student dropout problem. Your school district has been selected to participate in the study.

The purpose of the focus groups will be to assess the perceptions of teachers and counselors about a variety of issues related to the dropout problem. In a roundtable meeting, 10-12 focus group participants will be presented with specific discussion issues and with the guidance of the moderator debate them informally as a group. Your ideas, opinions, and recommendations are extremely important as they will help TCOVE plan strategies to respond to the dropout problem.

You will be encouraged to be open and honest in your discussions. The Bureau cannot guarantee the confidentiality of your comments as the discussions will be held in a group setting. However, at no time will your individual responses appear in any reports based on this research, and all references to your identity will be removed from all records that we maintain.

Your meeting schedule is as follows. I look forward to meeting with each of you then.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Sincerely,

Andrea L. Orchik,

Focus Group Moderator

Appendix D

Introductory Letter to Participants in the Technology Center Meetings

Dear Students:

The Tennessee Council on Vocational Education (TCOVE) has requested that the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) of The University of Memphis conduct informal meetings with students who attend TN Technology Centers to get their thoughts and recommendations about the subject of students who drop out of school. The Tennessee Technology Center in Jackson is one of the centers that has been selected to participate.

You will be in the meeting with 9–11 other students where I will ask you as a group to discuss your ideas, opinions, and recommendations about why students drop out of school. Your ideas, opinions, and recommendations are extremely important to TCOVE because they will help them plan ways to respond to what is considered a dropout problem. Individuals who take part in these kinds of meetings say they enjoyed them and were pleased that their comments would make a difference.

Our discussion will be informal. You will not be asked at anytime to discuss personal issues, and at no time should you discuss topics that make you feel uncomfortable. Also, your individual responses will not be revealed to anyone at TCOVE, and your individual responses will not appear in any reports. All references to your identity will be removed from all records that the Bureau maintains.

Your meeting schedule is as follows. I look forward to meeting with each of you then.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Sincerely,

Andrea L. Orchik,

Focus Group Moderator

Appendix E

TCOVE Dropout Focus Group

Research Project

Teachers and Counselors Discussion Guide

Location: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Number of teachers: _____ Number of counselors: _____

1. Let's begin by having you describe the dropout problem in your school district. *(General opening statement)*
 - A. Really, is it a problem in your school district? Yes? No? How so?
 - B. How does the dropout issue affect your school, other students, families, the community, and other?
 - C. Who or what else is affected by the dropout problem?
 - D. Is the problem complex or simple? If so, explain how, either way.

2. What are the characteristics of the dropout student? (Probe attendance, self-esteem, family issues, substance abuse, parental involvement, poverty, delinquency, class room misconduct.)
 - A. What is the stereotype? Is the description fair?

3. At what age or grade do you think students begin to consider dropping out of school?
 - A. Are you able to recognize at-risk students?
 - B. What have you observed about them?
 - C. Do the at-risk students seek your assistance or guidance?
 - D. Do students who have dropped out come to you for assistance or guidance?
 - E. Do you offer assistance or guidance to them? Explain.
 - F. Have you been successful or unsuccessful? Explain.
 - G. What, if anything, either promotes or hampers your efforts to deal with the issue?

- H. What, if anything, affects your efforts to deal with the dropout students?
 - I. Who or what encourages and supports your efforts?
 - J. Who should be involved in a day-to-day monitoring of potential dropout students?
4. Do you believe the number of dropouts in your district has increased, stayed the same, or decreased in the past 5-8 years? Statewide? Nationwide?
- A. Explain.
5. Does your school district have a dropout prevention program? Is so, describe it/them?
- A. If no, why not?
6. Based on your experience, how effective are current dropout programs: are they making a difference? Why or why not?
- A. What are their strengths?
 - B. What are their weaknesses?
 - C. Are the programs okay the way they are? If not, what could be done to strengthen them?
7. What are the realities associated with the dropout issue? Can we do better?

8. If you were given the opportunity to create a model dropout prevention program, what would it look like?
 - A. What would be the most important factors to consider and components to include? (Probe role of students; student, family; and community awareness programs; timelines; role of administration, teachers, and counselors, etc.).
 - B. What pitfalls and barriers would you need to aware of and prepare for?
 - C. Who/what would need to be a part of the effort? What would be the role of each?
9. Let's now summarize. What do you believe are the most important points that emerged from our discussion?
10. And finally, what are the final recommendations that you would like to make to policymakers or individuals who design dropout programs? What would you like to recommend they do to address the dropout problem?

Appendix F

TCOVE Dropout Focus Group

Research Project

Tennessee Technology Students

Location: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Number of students who dropped out: _____

Number of students who did not drop out: _____

1. Is dropping out of school a problem? (General opening statement)
 - A. How does the dropout issue affect your school, other students, families, the community, and other?
2. Why do students drop out of school?
3. Once they drop out, how does that decision affect their lives?
4. Do you think that students who drop out are better off, the same, or worse off?
5. Is it important that the dropout gets a GED?
6. What are the long-term consequences of dropping out?

7. At what age or grade do you think students begin to consider dropping out of school?
 - A. When students think about dropping out, do they typically talk it over with someone? Who?
 - B. Do students who consider dropping out talk it over with teachers or counselors?
 - C. Who should be involved in a day-to-day monitoring of potential dropout students?

8. Does your school district have a dropout prevention program? Is so, describe it/them?
 - A. If no, why not?

9. Do the dropout programs work? Why or why not?
 - A. What are their strengths?
 - B. What are their weaknesses?
 - C. Are the programs okay the way they are? If not, what could be done to strengthen them?

10. What are the realities associated with the dropout issue? Can we do better?

11. If you were given the opportunity to create a model dropout prevention program, what would it look like?
 - A. What would be the most important factors to consider and components to include? (Probe role of students; student, family, and community awareness programs; timelines; role of administration, teachers, and counselors, etc.).
 - B. What pitfalls and barriers would you need to aware of and prepare for?
 - C. Who/what would need to be a part of the effort? What would be the role of each?
12. Let's now summarize. What do you believe are the most important points that emerged from our discussion?
13. And finally, what are the final recommendations that you would like to make to teachers, counselors, parents, etc., that you think would help students want to stay in school?